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ABSTRACT

As pressures within university communities continue to mount to provide validation of outcomes and maximize use of scarce financial resources, forensic teams can establish their own validity while helping communities in their time of need. As society begins to splinter and its problems fester, forensics can offer American communities the very communication and dialectic skills it purports to create. When evaluating the role of forensics in future communities, it is necessary to first consider the futures of both forensics and American society, and then evaluate the possible interface between communities and the forensic world. One definite trend in forensics is toward computerization. Aside from word processing or information storage and retrieval, hypermedia and interactive video offer new communicative options, and virtual reality (where a computer can simulate a three-dimensional world) offers the potential for creating different types of virtual scenarios for forensics competitors. An apparent trend in American society is toward a greater rift along economic and educational lines. Forensics, taken into the community, can provide the forum, the stage where the divisive elements of American society can begin to be reunited, since the dedication to dialogue and free expression of ideas is intrinsic to all forensic activity. The Kettering Foundation for example, has been influential in sponsoring study circles on the future. (PRA)

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Taking Forensics into the Community:

Prospects for the Future

A Paper Presented at

The Speech Communication Association

Meeting

Atlanta, November 1, 1991

by

Patrick H. Garner

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Prediction is fraught with danger. Alvin Toffler himself, one of the world's best known futurists, has said, "Life is filled with surrealistic surprise." (Toffler, 1990, p. xxi) In the midst of today's rapidly changing socio-political environment, change seems to be the only given, the sole predictor of the future. But for those involved in forensic activities, the vague prediction of "change" for the future is hollow, offering precious little substance on which to base future direction. And isn't this the primary goal of prediction to allow for a more careful charting of a course of action?

Given the task of evaluating the role of forensics in future communities, it would seem necessary to consider at least two areas in depth. First one must consider what the future holds for both forensics and American society. Second, one must evaluate the possible interface between communities and the forensic world.

As an aspect of the American collegiate system, forensic programs are bound to trends affecting higher education. projections seem to indicate that as the pool for entering freshmen decreases, enrollments will fall. This will certainly necessitate financial and perhaps structural changes on the university level. It is impossible to tell how this change will impact on forensic programs. It would seem probable that future budgets will be tighter with a greater need for self-validation and goals assessment on all levels. Forensic educators will need to be more sensitive to planning goals, meeting them, and validating claims made about purported outcomes of forensic competition. It could be in future years that the forensic community's liaison with the community-at-large can be a critical source of validation for the existence of forensic competition.

Long term economic stability, or lack of it, in America will doubtless be a critical factor in the future of forensic competition. Analysts seem to predict a slow economic growth for the next several years. But economic predictions are so notoriously inaccurate. To predicate forensic activity based on a fluctuating GNP seems ill advised.

However, one can with assurity predict a greater trend toward computerization in forensics. As society as a whole, and the field of communication specifically plunge into the information age, opportunities for extensive use of computers will increase. As society as a whole becomes more

computer literate, the university student bodies from which forensics draws its population will be more reliant on media technology. Potential in this area goes far beyond word processing or information storage and retrieval, although these conveniences should not be ignored. The diffusion of voice-activated and pencil driven systems will make use of computers even more simplified. As this is occurring new technologies will emerge which could be very useful to forensicists as they reach out into communities. Two particular trends should be noted. Evidently the progressive development of hypermedia and specifically interactive video will offer communicative options never before available to communicators. (Paske, 1990) Already in existence, and being refined, is another media technology that offers interesting possibilities. Virtual reality (Wood, 1990) is a means by which one can, with a computer, simulate a three dimensional world. Although future developments in this area are unknown, the potential exists to create different types of virtual scenarios for a user. Forensic competitors could doubtless use virtual reality or interactive video to prepare for or even conduct tournaments. As well, the types of usages forensicists could create through media to benefit their communities would be bounded only by imagination. Consider the public service projects that could be done with interactive video. University forensic programs could link with secondary, primary, or even adult education for presentation of serious or light subjects. The use of new media forms in communities will present novel opportunities for the creation of public forums or for accessing well-known public figures for special presentations.

In short, the immediate future of forensics seems to be one of economic retrenchment. Pressure will increase to streamline programs and assess their outcomes empirically. Concurrently, opportunities through media advancement will open doors for community service for forensic programs that might help them achieve the goals set for them by their university administrators.

But even greater forces than those impinging on universities will be at work in American communities. Robert Reich, a Harvard economist, says (Dillin, 1991) that America is moving toward a two class society composed of the rich and the poor. In his analysis, the middle class will soon vanish, leaving the have's and the have-nots. Given such an economic and socio-political change, America's

> . . . primary political task will be to cope with the centrifugal forces . . . which tear at the ties binding citizens together.

> We are living through a transformation that will
> rearrange the politics of the coming century. (Dillin, 1991, p. 6)

Alvin Toffler in his book, *Power Shift* (1990) gets even more specific. America is moving from a smoke stack economy to one based on information and knowledge. Actually knowledge has supplanted force and become the key to wealth and power into the twenty-first century. Those who are privy to knowledge, particularly through technology, will have wealth and power. Those nations and people who do not will be left behind. For many, the future holds great things. For others the future seems bleak. Toffler (1990) sees the potential for great economic development. But he also sees the potential for tremendous world upheaval. "Religious fundamentalism, eco-medievalism and xenophobic ethnicism" all pose potential dangers for American and world society. They conjure

> up the image of a racist or tribal, eco-fascist, theological
> state - a maximal recipe for the suppression of human rights,
> freedom of religion, and private property as well. (Toffler, p. 386)

It would seem that the next two decades in America will be ones of national and personal turmoil. There will be a strong trend toward a greater rift in society along economic and educational lines. If indeed, Toffler's and other's predictions are correct, what can or should be the role of forensics in this divided and volatile society? Consider the following statements:

> What democracy requires is public debate, not information.
> Of course it needs information too, but the kind of
> information it needs can be generated only by vigorous
> popular debate. (Lasch, 1990, p. 72)

> A form of free dialogue may well be one of the most effective ways of
> investigating the crisis that faces society, and indeed the whole of
> human nature and consciousness today. (Bohm, 1991, p. 82)

> So many problems of national consequence roll through the country
> these days, begging for a forum, a stage, a someplace where we might
> spread them before us and talk them through. (Rosenblatt, 1991, p. 19)

Forensics, taken into the community, can provide the forum, the stage where the divisive elements of American society can begin to be reunited. Certainly face-to-face or even mediated interaction is no panacea. But intrinsic to all forensic activity is the dedication to dialogue and free expression of ideas that is a prerequisite to conflict resolution.

Several current examples of how dialogue and/or media have been used to bridge societal gaps and stimulate communication illustrate their potential value to society. Any of these examples may be replicated by forensic squads to reach into and beyond their own communities.

In 1988 the *Ledger-Enquirer* of Columbus, Georgia, began a series of articles on the future of that city. The series was entitled "Columbus: Beyond 2000." But wanting more citizen involvement, the newspaper combined their written messages with a series of town meetings (Rosen, 1991). A member of the newspaper staff who received discussion training from the Kettering Foundation, led the first town meeting. About three hundred people representing various groups in the city attended. Subsequent meetings were held at various locations, including backyard barbecues, to bring citizens together who normally would not mix. "At one meeting four hundred teenagers showed up at a local mall to discuss their problems." Generally the goal of these meetings was "to help people of different races, economic classes, and social circles discover common interests" (Rosen, 1991, p. 20).

The Kettering Foundation has also been influential in sponsoring study circles across the United States. In 1700 communities in America, citizens are participating in discussions of national and international problems (Emigh, 1991). The Study Circles Resource Center has been formed "to advance deliberative democracy and improve the quality of public life in the United States" through small group discussions "on social and political issues" (Emigh, 1991, p. 2). At no charge, the Resource Center will send a packet of information on a certain subject to interested parties. Packets contain a framework for a discussion, resource articles, and sets of guidelines for leaders and participants. Sample topics would include: "American Society and Economic Policy," "America's Role in the Middle East," "The Health Care Crisis in America," and others. Such study circles are government sponsored in Sweden and Denmark. In Sweden they are so popular that a third of the adult population participated (Mills, 1991).

A form of group discussion, the salon, has been influential at various times in world history. According to William Doyle (Mills, 1991, p. 69) "the aristocratic ladies of the salons were the midwives of the enlightenment." Mable Dodge had an influential salon in early twentieth century Greenwich Village. The Algonquin Round Table in the 1920's was noted for its witty literary conversations. And so today, the community, campus, or home salon can make a difference and begin to generate interest in and solutions to world problems. In American today there are even "virtual" salons (Branwyn, 1991). With a personal computer and a modem one can travel across the U. S. and to some places in the world electronically "visiting" libraries, service centers, bulletin boards, shopping malls and emerging electronic villages" (Branwyn, p. 86). Whole virtual communities exist. One of these is called the Well. It has over 3800 subscribers, quite eclectic in nature. "More than a hundred conferences and thousands of discussions are available" (Branwyn, p. 86). A user may work in the Well, "learn there . . . socialize there . . . provide and receive therapy . . . and recreate" (Branwyn, p. 86). The concepts of space and time are transcended through this virtual community. Thus, human skills of dialogue can be interfaced with computer technology.

I have attempted to respond to the question of what forensics can do in the future to aid America's communities. As pressures within university communities continue to mount to provide validation of outcomes and maximize use of scarce financial resources, forensic teams can establish their own validity while helping communities in their time of need. As society begins to splinter and its problems fester, let forensics offer to American communities the very communication and dialectic skills it purports to create.

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